

## CONFERENCE ON BURNING QUESTIONS.

The Conference convened by the Royal British Nurses' Association, and held at 11, Chandos Street, Cavendish Square, W., on December 3rd, to consider questions of burning interest to the nursing profession, was an important and interesting meeting.

In the unavoidable absence, through indisposition, of Miss M. Heather Bigg, R.R.C., the chair was taken by Mrs. Bedford Fenwick. She was supported on the platform by Mrs. Campbell Thomson, Nurse Hon. Secretary of the Association, Dr. H. C. Crouch, M.R.C.S., Miss M. Breay, Hon. Secretary, Registered Nurses' Parliamentary Council, Miss A. Cattell, Member General Council, R.B.N.A., Miss Isabel Macdonald, Secretary R.B.N.A., Mrs. Paul, Chairman Professional Union of Trained Nurses, Miss M. F. Rimmer, Hon. Organising Secretary National Union of Trained Nurses, and Miss Florence Wise, Chairman Association of Trained Nurses in Public Health Work.

In opening the Conference, Mrs. Fenwick said that the business before the meeting would be put forward in the form of resolutions, and she hoped that when they had been proposed and seconded, the nurses present would discuss them and express their opinion upon their own affairs. She then called on Miss Breay to move the first resolution.

### RESOLUTION I.

#### THE UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT.

MISS BREAY said the resolution which she had the honour to propose dealt with the Act to amend the law in respect of Insurance against unemployment, which became law on August 9th, 1920, and was as follows:—

That the provisions of the Unemployment Insurance Act, 1920, should not apply to professional nurses, trained and in training, to whose conditions of service it is unsuitable.

In the opinion of Trained Nurses, the result of this new taxation will be to compel them to contribute to a scheme designed to benefit industrial and not professional workers, which is therefore unjust. This meeting of Trained Nurses desires to record its unqualified disapproval of the provisions of the Unemployment Insurance Act as affecting the members of their profession, and expresses its conviction that it will add one more factor to the unpopular conditions which deter many desirable candidates from entering the Nursing Profession.

This Meeting respectfully urges the Minister of Labour to formulate a Special Scheme regulating the unemployment insurance of professional nurses.

In moving the resolution Miss Breay expressed the opinion that very few nurses knew anything about the Unemployment Insurance Act, 1920, or realised the way in which it would affect them, until it was on the Statute Book. With certain defined exceptions, it applied to all employed persons of sixteen years of age and upwards. Women were required to pay 3d. weekly, their employers 3½d., and the State paid 1½d. After making twelve payments, a woman could make application for

unemployment benefit in the prescribed manner, and when her application was approved, she could claim 12s. a week, but not for more than 15 weeks in any one year.

Miss Breay claimed that the Act should not apply to professional nurses, trained and in training, because it was unsuited to their conditions of service. Like the National Insurance Act, it was framed to meet the needs of the industrial out-worker, not the professional woman whose conditions of service were quite different.

First, as to probationers in training.

The Act ought not to apply to them, as there was not the remotest chance of their being unemployed for a day (they sometimes wished there was). Why should committees of hospitals have to pay 3½d. a week for the insurance of thousands of probationers, amounting to a large sum annually, when they did not know where to turn for a penny?

The only reason why nurses in training should be brought within the scope of the Act was to strengthen its financial stability. As an official of the Ministry of Labour recently explained, if you only had the people liable to fall out of work the Act would be unworkable. But surely the tax paid should be estimated on a basis to cover the liabilities of those who might benefit by it; contributions should not be levied on those who could by no possibility do so.

In regard to trained nurses, supposing a nurse proved that she was entitled to unemployment benefit, what must she do to get it?

- (1) Register at an unemployment exchange.
- (2) Attend there, and sign her name in a book daily.
- (3) Accept any "suitable" work which may be offered to her, even if in a distant part of the country. The suitability of the work would apparently be decided by an insurance officer, who probably knew nothing of nursing or nurses, but there was an appeal from him to a Court of Referees, and an appeal by him from that court to an umpire, so the insured person might have to work pretty hard for that 12s., and might be better employed looking out for "suitable" work on her own account.

Exemption might be claimed by persons having a pension or income of £26 or upwards, or who were not dependent on their own exertions.

Certain employments, such as agriculture and domestic service, were exempt, employment in the naval, military, or air services of the Crown, and those serving under any local or other public authority, and, otherwise than by way of manual labour, at a rate of remuneration exceeding in value £250 a year. On this basis nurses working on the co-operative principle should claim exemption, as their fees of £3 3s., and emoluments, which were certainly not less than £2 2s., brought their earnings up to the required amount.

Some nurses thought they might claim exemption as domestic servants, but they should remember that the Act did not apply to domestic servants employed in any trade or business carried on for

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